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THE Unexplained

MYSTERIES OF MIND SPACE & TIME

144

Secret UFO files
The Schneider brothers
Ghost with wet boots
Prester John: found?
The dead speak out

Aus & NZ $1.85 SA R1.85 IR 85p US $1.85

THE Unexplained
MYSTERIES OF MIND SPACE & TIME

Published weekly by Orbis Publishing Limited
Orbis House, 20/22 Bedfordbury, London WC2N 4BT

Volume 12 Issue 144

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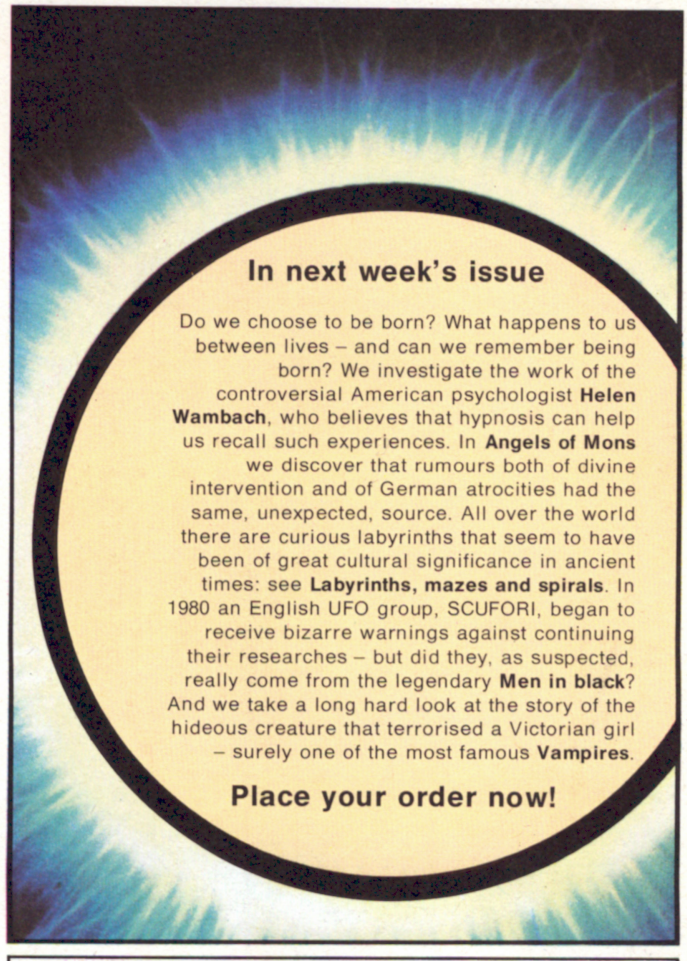
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Subscription Rates
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Back numbers
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A fine pair

Willi and Rudi Schneider became celebrated mediums in the 1920s and were stringently investigated by leading psychical researchers of the day. Yet, as ANITA GREGORY explains, doubts remain about their authenticity

IN THE SPRING OF 1919 rumours began flying around the small Austrian city of Braunau. It was said that spirits were being conjured up in the flat of Herr Josef Schneider. Twenty years later the psychical investigator Harry Price was to write of Braunau as 'a charming frontier old-world village which is famous as the birthplace of three distinguished persons – Adolf Hitler, and Willi and Rudi Schneider, the Austrian physical mediums.'

Josef and Elise Schneider had 12 children altogether, nine boys and three girls, but only six boys survived: Karl, Hans, Fritz, Willi, Franz and Rudi.

Rudi, the youngest, was born on 27 July 1908. His parents, disappointed that he was a boy, put him in girls' clothing, curled his hair and even called him 'Rudolfine' for a time. He seemed to have survived the ordeal, taking up the traditionally boyish pursuit of football and showing a special interest in cars and aeroplanes – a preoccupation he shared with his brother Willi who was five years older.

There are slight variations in the stories of how the mediumistic activities began. The most widely told version is that in the early spring of 1919, officers stationed at Braunau

Willi Schneider in a state of trance during a seance in Munich in 1922. Two German psychical researchers are acting as controllers

Left: Elise and Josef Schneider with their psychic sons Rudi and Willi. Josef, who worked as a typesetter in a local printing house, kept a detailed record of Rudi's seances in two thick exercise books that became known as Vater Schneider's ghost books

began buying large quantities of paper from the print shop below the Schneider flat. The family discovered that the officers were holding spirit seances, and the paper was needed for recording spirit messages being spelt out by a planchette – a small board mounted on castors, and with a pencil attached.

Mrs Schneider and some friends decided to experiment with a planchette themselves, but without success. When some of the Schneider boys returned home one afternoon they also tried but the planchette would not move. It was only when Willi arrived and took a turn that the planchette began to slide across the paper. Josef Schneider, who was affectionately known as Vater ('Father') Schneider, explained what happened:

> It began to write 'Olga' in beautiful handwriting. Everyone was astonished and someone from the circle called out 'Well, what sort of an Olga are you then?' The reply was 'I was the mistress of the King of Bavaria, called Lola Montez.' Now the questioning began and every day until midnight we did table turning and writing.

Initially, the planchette appeared to move most fluently when Willi's hand was resting on it. Then one day, it apparently moved when his hand was not on but above it. As the questioning continued, Olga does not seem to have repeated or insisted upon her claim that she was Lola Montez, a colourful and tempestuous Irish-Spanish dancer, created Countess von Landsfeld by King Ludwig I who had to abdicate his throne in 1848, some claim, because of his liaison with Lola.

Right: Lola Montez, the dancer and famous beauty who lived from 1818 to 1861 and had a notorious liaison with King Louis I of Bavaria which may have cost him his throne. At first Olga, Willi Schneider's spirit guide, claimed to be Lola; but Olga could not understand English even though Lola had been the daughter of a British army officer; nor could Olga give any details of Lola's life

History tells how Lola could speak English fluently whereas Olga could not even understand it. And, indeed, on later occasions when Olga was asked to give details about Lola's life she was unable to do so. It seems likely that her identity was wished on her by the seance participants, but not by Willi, nor by Olga herself.

Vater Schneider asked Olga if they could help her in any way. She wrote that they could indeed: would they have some masses said for the repose of her soul, please? The family were devout enough Catholics to comply with her request, though not sufficiently obedient members of their Church to desist from having seances. The masses were said, the seances continued. Olga was apparently grateful for their help and she promised that in return for their kindness she would make their name famous throughout the world. This promise she kept: the events that took place that day were to signal the beginning of a series of paranormal phenomena that were to startle the world.

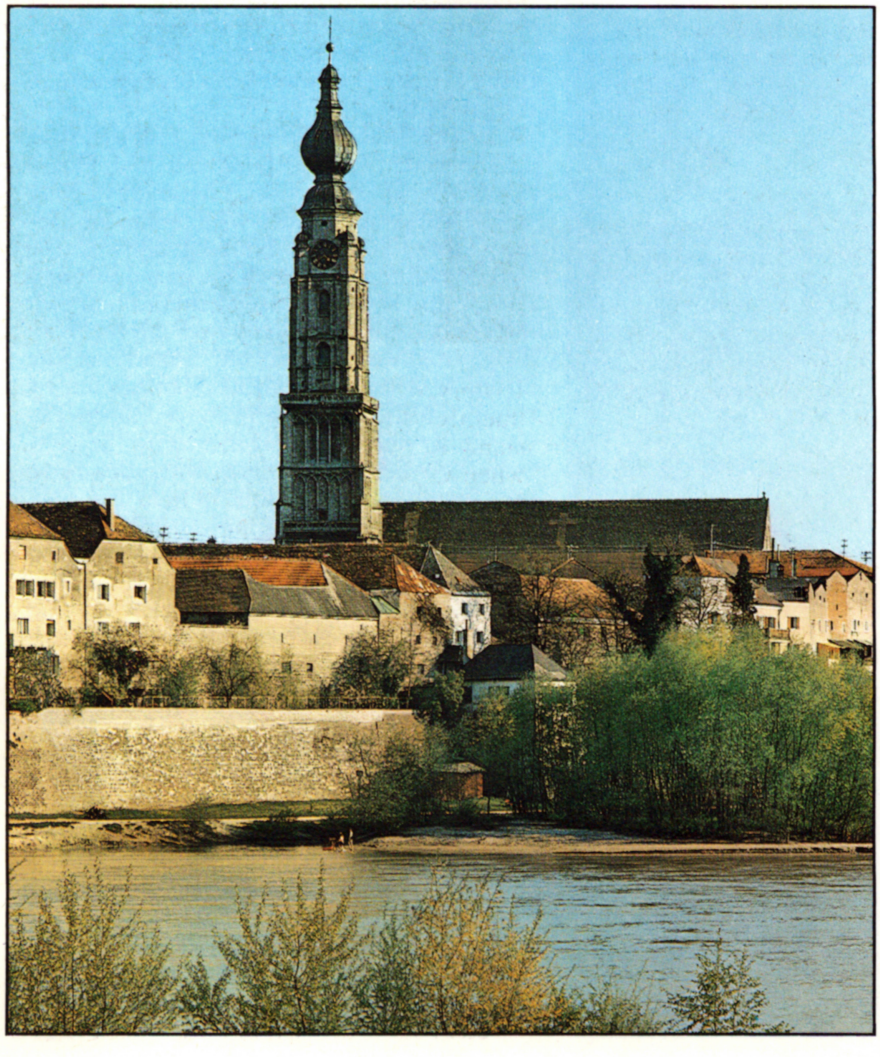
Olga instructed the family to cover a kitchen stool with a large cloth and to place objects – including handkerchiefs and a basinful of water – near it. Willi sat next to the stool and, apparently, within a short time strange things started to happen. The water splashed out of the bowl, two tiny hands appeared to materialise, the sound of clapping was heard, objects placed near the stool were said to move; a handkerchief, for instance, was drawn beneath the cloth and then thrown out again with knots tied in the four corners, and sometimes the hands seemed to tap those of the onlookers. Throughout the activities Willi seemed unconcerned and appeared to be enjoying the chaos that was being created around him.

One of the witnesses was a Captain Kogelnik, a man not naturally predisposed to believe in occult goings-on and rather inclined to dismiss them as antiquated, medieval rubbish. However, that first encounter with Willi Schneider's mediumship was to transform his outlook. According to Kogelnik, in those early days before Willi became an international celebrity, his ability to produce phenomena was at its height:

> Not even the slightest attempt was made by him to support the supernormal phenomena through normal means. He never fell into trance: he himself watched the manifestations with as much interest as any other person present.

Kogelnik describes how, on one occasion, the cloth over the stool lifted and a small hand emerged: 'I quickly and firmly grasped it and was just about to draw out from the table what I thought must be there – when I found my closed fist was empty and a heavy blow was dealt against it.'

Below: the small Austrian city of Braunau, where Willi and Rudi Schneider were born and brought up



Increasing conviction

As Kogelnik returned to the Schneider household and regularly witnessed Willi's skills, he became increasingly convinced that he was observing genuine physical phenomena. They were, he wrote, splendid:

> A zither was put on the floor, close to the table cloth, and out from under the table there came a small hand with four fingers stroking the strings and trying to play. This hand was well visible, looked like that of a baby and was very well developed in every detail as far as the wrist, above which it passed off into a thin . . . glimmering ray which disappeared behind the table cloth. . . . A large brush was put before the table cloth. The hand grasped it and began energetically to brush the floor in front of and behind the cloth. . . .

To begin with, Olga had written out her wishes and instructions while Willi was fully awake. After a time, however, she began to speak through him while he was in a trance; when this happened his voice came out as an unfamiliar hoarse whisper. Also at this stage, another phenomenon occurred: Willi began producing ectoplasm. Kogelnik described it as being a cobweb-like substance, first wrapped around the medium's face, then materialising on one shoulder, then the other. The

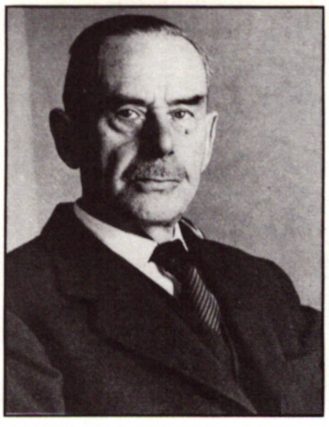
Below right: Willi producing ectoplasm at one of his early sittings. Witnesses who saw the ectoplasm described it as a cobweb-like substance, or like an undulating, phosphorescent fog emanating from the boy's head

substance seemed to disappear without a trace. One day Olga invited Kogelnik to take a closer look. From a distance of about 10 inches (25 centimetres) he saw a faint undulating phosphorescent fog being emitted from the boy's head. It eventually appeared to settle on Willi's hair like a cap, before being withdrawn into the body through his nose.

Neither was this the most extraordinary occurrence. On one occasion a phantom 5 feet (1.5 metres) tall gracefully danced a tango for the delighted onlookers before disappearing, perhaps in search of a partner.

Not surprisingly, Willi's phenomena soon attracted local and then international attention. Various scientists went to Braunau to investigate. Among the most important figures in psychical research in Europe at that time was Baron von Schrenck-Nötzing. Kogelnik contacted him, aware that he would be interested in Willi.

Schrenck-Nötzing began systematic experiments with the boy in December 1921; these were to continue for several years, and altogether he had 124 seances with Willi. He published his findings in 1924. Twenty seven university teachers and 29 other interested people, including doctors and writers, participated in these experiments, the results of which were claimed to be strongly positive, with the phenomena reported as happening in the Schneider household being repeated in the laboratory.



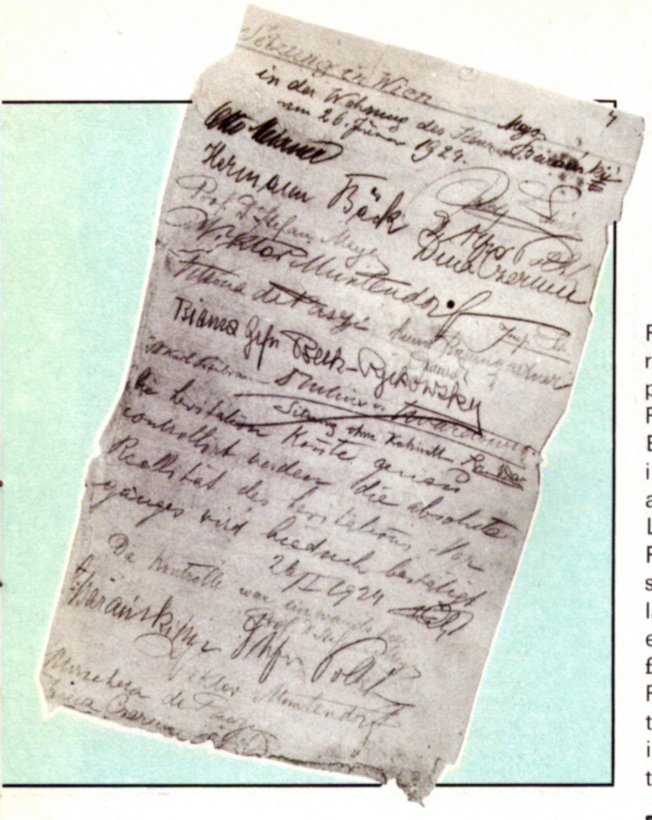
The flashlight picture (below) of one of Willi's sittings reveals a fake 'phantom' pinned to the curtain. But many people, including the novelist Thomas Mann (above), were convinced Willi's powers were genuine

The eyes have it

Vater Schneider's ghost books, a complete record of Rudi's seances, helped Rudi when an accusation of fraud was levelled against him. Two Viennese professors, Stefan Meyer and Karl Przibram, who had attended a seance with Rudi, later claimed that the controller had been influencing the sitting. Vater Schneider was able to defend his son's integrity by producing the very page (right) on which the two professors had endorsed the seance record, one of them adding for good measure the words '*Die Kontrolle war einwandfrei*' – 'the control was perfect.' They were obliged to retract the claim that they had caught Rudi cheating, and had to content themselves with asserting that they had found a 'natural' way of producing the phenomena.

Among those who carried out investigations were Dr E.J. Dingwall and Harry Price who together visited Munich in May 1922. It was apparently with 'some amusement' that Schrenck-Nötzing allowed the two Englishmen to search for trap doors and false walls. Having satisfied themselves that intruders could get in only through the front door, this was locked and sealed for the duration of the experiments. Unaffected by these conditions, Willi produced some extraordinary phenomena, including the levitation of a table, which rose with such force that Dingwall was unable to hold it down. After a series of tests Dingwall thought the evidence was strong enough to point to phenomena that were, indeed, the work of unexplained 'supernormal agencies'. At that point he felt he could 'scarcely entertain with patience' the idea that all involved were engaged in a hoax. Unfortunately, however, Dingwall was not to maintain his conviction: he suggested, some time later, that Schrenk-Nötzing must have somehow been responsible for what they had witnessed, though it is difficult to see how the Baron could have achieved such a feat.

Willi's mediumship gradually began to wane and by the time he came to be investigated in London in 1924 the phenomena he did seem capable of producing were very disappointing. However, in 1919, before the decline had become firmly established, Olga



made one of her strangest announcements to date. In the hoarse hurried whisper that was characteristic of Willi in trance, she stated that she wanted Rudi, that he was a stronger medium than Willi. The Schneider parents objected: Rudi was only 11 years old, he could not stay up late, he would be frightened. Olga was adamant. 'He will come!' she said. And he did for, as the Schneiders were arguing with Olga, the door opened and Rudi entered the room. He looked as if he were sleepwalking: his eyes were tightly closed and his hands outstretched. The moment he sat down, phenomena started to occur.

Rising star

Rudi went into a trance and spoke as Olga. Willi, meanwhile, appeared to take on a new personality who announced herself as 'Mina' and spoke in a voice quite distinct from the one previously used by Willi when in trance. Olga was never again to speak through Willi and, with the phenomena he could produce already in decline, his younger brother now became the focus of attention.

Schrenck-Nötzing took an interest from the earliest days of Rudi's mediumship and experiments were begun at once. At first they were held in Braunau but later the boy was investigated at the Baron's own laboratory in Munich. The powers Rudi seemed to possess were equal to those of his brother.

From the outset Vater Schneider decided to keep a record of his second son's progress. He quickly learned what was needed by way of documentation and evidence. His long experience with Willi helped to convince him of the need to keep a systematic account of every seance in which he participated. In the case of Rudi this was a substantial number.

Every time there was a sitting he entered the names of those present, the date and the place in an exercise book. Then he – or someone appointed to do so – gave an account of what had happened at the sitting. And finally all those participating were asked to sign the record alongside any comments they cared to make.

The two thick exercise books that Vater Schneider managed to fill make fascinating reading. They were always described as Vater Schneider's *Geisterbücher* – or ghost books. He refused to be parted from them in his lifetime, but Rudi's widow gave them to this author when she learned that I was interested in Rudi's mediumship.

These books are fading now; the binding is extremely frail, but the accounts of sittings can still be read quite easily. Altogether they contain reports of 269 sittings, from 8 December 1923 to 1 January 1932. These painstakingly collected data provide good evidence for the genuineness of Rudi Schneider's psychic powers.

On page 2906: the ghost books analysed and more evidence collected

Rudi being subjected to rigorous tests by the English psychical researcher Harry Price, who invited him to England for a series of investigations under the auspices of the National Laboratory of Psychical Research. While Rudi was staying in London the laboratory paid his hotel expenses plus a stipend of £3 a week, which, as Harry Price observed, was more than he would have earned in Austria at his apprenticed trade of motor mechanic

When the US government finally opened its top secret UFO files to the public it was obvious that there had been a deliberate cover up. Other governments had, apparently, covered up too – but why? JENNY RANDLES assesses the implications of such a policy

UFOs: the right to know

ONE MIGHT THINK that the story of official UFO investigation in the United States ended with the release of the Blue Book files in 1977 (see page 2845). In fact, in one sense, it had only begun at this point. For it became evident that the CIA had played a dominant part in the UFO business – and not only, as many first suspected, by changing the United States Air Force's UFO policy through manipulating the Robertson Panel. In an attempt to find out what other clandestine operations had taken place, a civilian group, Ground Saucer Watch, and then later a specially formed 'action' campaign called Citizens Against UFO Secrecy, set up lawsuits to weedle out 'classified' information from the various intelligence agencies.

Using the new Freedom of Information Act as a lever, they succeeded – after a fight –

No aliens in Whitehall

The British Ministry of Defence (MOD) has been collecting UFO reports since the 1960s and continues to do so. Its Whitehall offices (right) house files that would, if ever released, prove extremely interesting to ufologists. The number of UFO reports for 1981 alone – as quoted in the House of Lords UFO debate in March 1982 – show that the MOD collected over five times as many cases during that year as Britain's leading civilian UFO society, the British UFO Research Association (BUFORA).

The MOD says that UFO reports are the province of one small department that has, in fact, principal responsibility for low-flying aircraft. Jenny Randles has engaged in a lengthy battle with the department concerned, suggesting that it would be in everyone's best interest for it to release its UFO files to a scientific establishment, since the MOD has repeatedly claimed that whatever UFOs are, they represent no threat to national security. But she has been refused access to the files on the basis that they contain 'classified information'.

When, in 1983, she asked the MOD for a statement regarding its present policy on UFOs, she received the following:

'The sole interest of the Ministry of Defence in UFO reports is to establish whether they reveal anything of defence interest. . . . There is no unit within the Ministry appointed solely for the study of UFOs, and no staff are employed upon the subject on a full-time basis.

'The Ministry of Defence does not deny that there are strange things to see in the sky. It believes, however, that

in obtaining some reports. Although fragmentary, they reveal evidence of military involvement previously unknown. There was much that post-dated the closure of Project Blue Book, which had allegedly ended the US government's interest in UFOs. Dr J. Allen Hynek said in summarising these documents, 'In case after case in these military dispatches, the reliability and technical competence of the witness is attested to. In case after case, the UFO remains a UFO . . . that is, completely unidentified.'

Among the papers are radar-visual cases, jet plane chases and a very disturbing wave of sightings between 27 October and 10 November 1975 when low-level aerial objects that were not identified repeatedly 'buzzed' sensitive missile launch facilities and military weapons stores. There is also mention of the classic 1976 radar-visual report when an Iranian jet had apparently been inspected by a 'probe' from a UFO (see page 2579). These accounts were often of such great interest that, as the circulation lists appended showed, copies were sent to the US Secretary of State, the Pentagon, the White House and several security agencies.

Under the direction of lawyer Peter Gersten, and several American UFO experts, the legal battle has continued. The existence of hundreds of pertinent documents has been admitted to by the authorities, but most of them have not been released. A lawsuit against the National Security Agency for the release of 131 admitted UFO documents reached the Supreme Court of Appeals in 1982 after being rejected at all other levels. The following official statement illustrates the reason given for non-release of this material: 'Public interest in the disclosure is far outweighed by the sensitive nature of the materials and the obvious effect on national security their release may well entail.' Certain sceptics suggest that this simply implies that UFO investigations may also turn up top-secret defence data. But surely such information could be censored? Yet it remains highly probable that not even 'sanitised' versions of these papers will be accessible.

there are adequate material explanations for these. . . . It certainly has no evidence that alien spacecraft have landed on this planet.

'In response to demands for publication of UFO reports Viscount Long [of the MOD] said that he saw no objection to these reports being made public. We are therefore studying the best means of publishing this material.'

On the surface this seems a reasonable enough attitude, but still UFOs are not treated as a scientific issue by British government institutions.

A decision to release the British files was taken during 1982 but was severely delayed by the Falklands war. The decision was a direct result of a long battle waged by Lord Clancarty and his House of Lords All Party UFO Study Group, who finally forced the 1982 debate on the subject. The study group includes former Admiral of the Fleet, Lord Hill-Norton who – even while holding a top-level position in the MOD – knew nothing of the sheer scale of the UFO problem. He now believes that he was deliberately kept in ignorance of a cover up campaign – but on whose orders? And if someone at his level was not considered fit to be told of a cover up, then who was?

Left: a flock of whooper swans. In certain atmospheric conditions or in twilight, a mass of white birds can look uncannily like luminous UFOs flying in formation. During the US government's cover up period *all* UFO reports were explained away as misidentified natural or everyday objects, such as birds, weather balloons – or even planets. Obviously some of these explanations were correct, but there still remained many genuine UFOs on file. And the British Ministry of Defence, while admitting that there are many strange things in the skies, takes a similar line

Above: Claude Poher (on the right), the director of the French group GEPAN, the only known government-funded UFO research team, which folded early in 1983. During its time, however, various members of the group made highly provocative public statements: for example, in 1979 Dr Pierre Guérin wrote in *Flying Saucer Review*, 'An intelligence controls the UFOs. And it is not ours'

Sense and sensibilities

Even the ruling judges in these cases have been officially 'cleared' only to see lengthy affidavits explaining why the documents must not be released. Just what is it about UFOs that causes documents concerning them to be of such a sensitive nature? It is hardly surprising that some ufologists in the United States are more convinced than ever that their government has not told all it knows. And so the battle in the courts goes on – despite a desperate shortage of funds.

The American UFO scene being so confused, it is almost inevitable that the situation in Europe is in a similar state. Many European nations rely on the USA for defence aid – so it seems logical to direct the question of unidentified aerial objects in Europe at the US military.

It is possible, for example, that countries such as Britain have looked to the USA for a lead about UFOs and, noting the inconclusive nature of the USAF research projects and the negative Condon Report, concluded that UFOs represent no defence threat, in which case further research would be a waste of time. Then again, if secret, high-level investigation has been conducted into the UFO phenomenon – for whatever reason – the whole of NATO might conceivably have been made aware of this fact and, perhaps, its conclusions.

In Britain the Ministry of Defence says UFOs are not of 'defence interest' (see box). It

Spain's official line on UFOs has become increasingly open. In 1976 ufologist Juan José Benitez was astonished to be offered access to certain government UFO files; since then various detailed accounts of close encounters have been available for public scrutiny. One such was the 1979 case in which a Caravelle airliner (below) was 'buzzed' by a UFO (right) near Madrid. The pilot, Comandante Tejada (bottom), made a full report to the authorities, which was then passed on to ufologists

also says that is the only aspect of the problem that is of interest. Yet it continues to collect UFO reports, and when asked to hand the information over to a scientific institute it refuses to do so, using (as in the United States) the excuse that national security might be compromised. While this could, of course, be a wholly reasonable proposition, it could very easily be misconstrued as an attempt to hide unpalatable facts.

Other European governments have, in the past, behaved rather like that of Britain, but have gradually modified their approach to UFOs. Spain is typical of this new liberal attitude. In October 1976 the journalist and UFO investigator Juan José Benitez was rather astonished to be offered access to some government documents concerning UFOs. A whole batch of reports was 'cleared' for him, and others followed. These turned out to be detailed accounts of sightings of puzzling aerial phenomena, nearly always involving military personnel. Reports containing accounts of radar trackings and military jet

scramblings formed the basis of the documents that were released later.

Benitez has published the contents of several of these files in *Flying Saucer Review*, and there seems every indication that this new, open approach will continue. In November 1980, for example, the Spanish Minister of Transport said that, in his view, there was now no doubt that UFOs are 'real'. This followed an incident in 1974 in which a UFO, tracked on radar, made a close approach to a civil airliner, causing it to make a forced landing.

In June 1976, General Carlos Cabero was quoted as saying: 'I have for some time held the view that UFOs are extra-terrestrial craft.' He added that many countries were collaborating on research and that the world would soon be 'told the truth'.

But the first European nation to respond with a new initiative to the UFO phenomenon was France. Indeed the French stance on the subject remains unique throughout the world. (Yet, oddly, the British MOD told this author some time ago that its position did not differ significantly from that of France.)

Between 28 January and 22 March 1974 the radio station France-Inter ran a nightly series of interviews with various world experts on UFOs. This included a most significant session with the then French Minister of Defence, M. Robert Galley. He talked freely about UFOs, saying:

> I will indeed go so far as to say that it is irrefutable that there are things today that are inexplicable, or poorly explained. . . . I must say that if your listeners could see for themselves the mass of reports coming in from the

> airborne gendarmerie, from the mobile gendarmerie, and from the gendarmerie charged with the job of conducting investigations . . . then they would see that it is all pretty disturbing. . . .

Such a categorical statement is undeniably of the greatest importance. France is one of the most technologically advanced countries in the world. If its defence minister makes comments such as these then presumably they ought to be treated very seriously. Perhaps significantly, no British newspaper made any comment about this remarkable disclosure.

The police had indeed handled the official investigation of UFO reports in France; in 1970 they began to pass them to Dr Claude Poher at the Space Centre in Toulouse. Poher, a leading UFO researcher, worked on these in a private capacity and often reported his findings in *Flying Saucer Review.*

Not long after Galley's speech the French government gave Poher a grant to head a new team of scientists based at the Space Centre: the *Groupe d'Etude des Phénomènes Aerospatiaux Non-Identifiés* (GEPAN) – the group for the study of unidentified aerial phenomena. On the basis of its early results funds were increased. It was the only known government-backed UFO research team in the world; and it seems that (to that French government at least) the output was well worth the investment. GEPAN published several reports in its first three years, but these stopped after about 1981.

A key member of the GEPAN team was the astrophysicist Dr Pierre Guérin. In 1979 he summarised its latest position in a lengthy paper published in *Flying Saucer Review.* Guérin's article can be described only as astonishing. For he thoroughly and logically eliminated all the stock explanations for UFOs and particularly those then in vogue (such as their psychic origin), concluding emphatically: 'An intelligence controls the UFOs. And it is not ours.'

In the early 1980s the French government seems to have become less enthusiastic about UFOs. It is said that, on his deathbed, President Georges Pompidou turned to his old friend the Defence Minister Robert Galley (below centre) saying: '. . . we have enough muck on our hands without bringing in the saucers.' And Dr Alain Esterle (bottom), then head of GEPAN, became noticeably withdrawn on the subject of UFOs – and shortly afterwards GEPAN was disbanded. Was this merely an economy measure – or was there something more sinister behind it?

According to Guérin, this unknown intelligence deliberately sets out to make scientists doubt its existence and also to persuade us that we are masters of the world – when the chilling truth is that we are not; it is. As he put it, when discussing the intelligence's motives, 'The ox will never know that he will be chopped up into beefsteaks.' However Guérin did not think we were destined for some larder in the sky. On the contrary, he believes this intelligence has continually guided our progress.

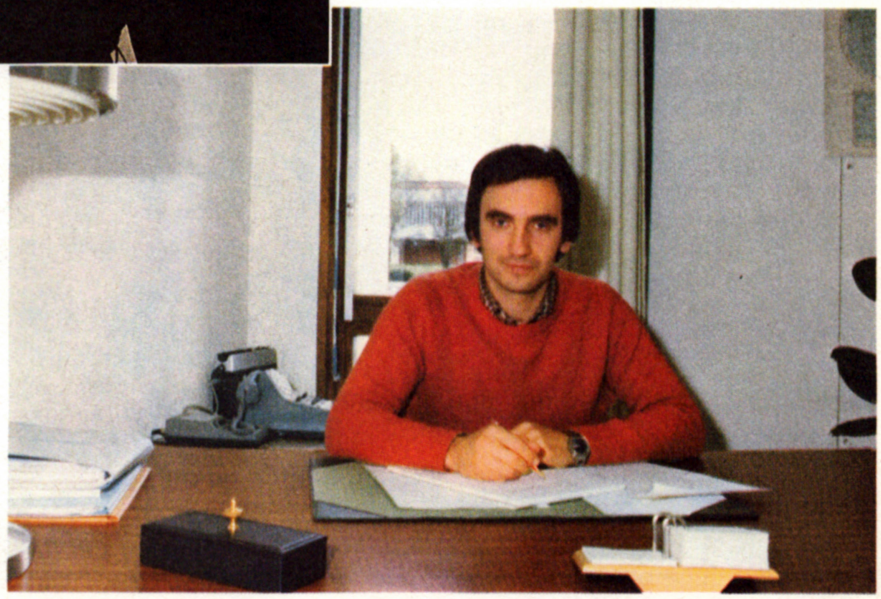
This was a member of a full-time official UFO project speaking. And he added that 'in our [presumably GEPAN's] opinion they [the governments of the world] do know the truth about the reality of UFOs but have no idea of how to go about tackling the problem.'

But Guérin made no more public statements. And Claude Poher left GEPAN to sail round the world in a home-made boat. He has not been heard from since. The next head of GEPAN, Dr Alain Esterle, remained much more tight-lipped than his predecessors, although he continued to receive support from civilian UFO societies.

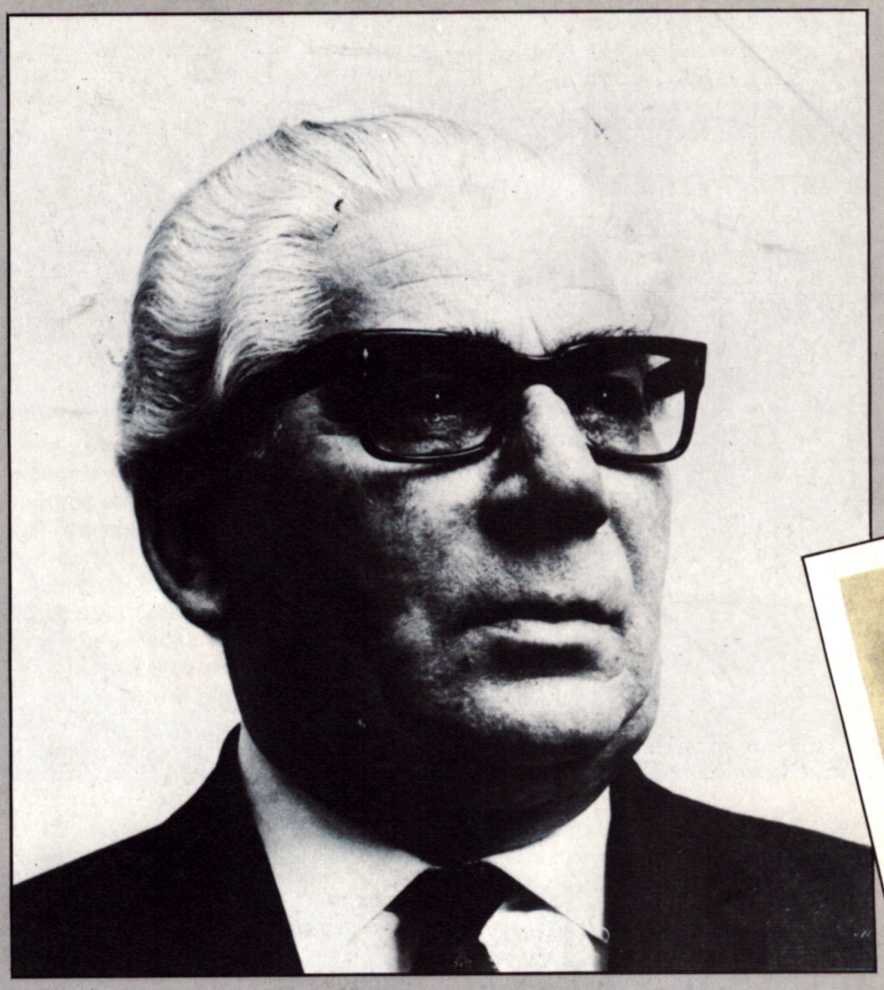
In the circumstances, some people see this sudden change of attitude of the official French team as highly suspicious. And it is alleged, on good authority, that the French president Georges Pompidou, on his deathbed, said to his good friend the Defence Minister Galley: 'Don't you think we have enough muck on our hands without bringing in the saucers.' Some might read into such a statement Pompidou's belief in the existence of UFOs – and their nuisance value.

In late 1982 a number of French UFO groups began to express their frustrations at the sudden about-face of GEPAN's attitudes – but then the French government suddenly removed its financial backing. The group was disbanded.

The disturbing implications of the world's official UFO reports: on page 2918



The voices of celebrities could often be heard at seances held by Leslie Flint, for show business personalities seemed to favour him as a channel of 'direct voice communication'. ROY STEMMAN describes the long career of an outstanding psychic



In a manner of speaking

LONG AFTER THEY DIED, Rudolph Valentino, Lionel Barrymore and Leslie Howard continued to 'perform' before appreciative audiences. Not on stage or film, of course, but in the darkened seance room of the London direct voice medium Leslie Flint. They are but a few of the famous dead – the full list reads like a *Who's who* of the arts, with an additional sprinkling from other notable professions – who communicated through Flint during the 42 years that he worked as a professional medium.

It has to be said at the outset that claiming spirit contact with the famous usually arouses suspicion. Their lives, likes and loves are usually public knowledge and a gifted impersonator would have no difficulty in posing as a medium and 'communicating' in a voice similar to that of the late celebrity

But Leslie Flint's spirit visitors were not always famous. At the height of his career many ordinary people were able to pay a fee to sit with him and some later testified to speaking to their relatives and friends. Flint, in such circumstances, could have known nothing about the dead who returned, and faking their voices and speech mannerisms is seemingly out of the question.

This account, however, will concentrate on the celebrities who have apparently returned from the grave to hold long conversations at Leslie Flint's seances. His spirit links with show business stars took him to the United States and to the Hollywood homes of legendary figures. The wealth he encountered on those visits was in stark contrast to the poverty he experienced as a child.

Leslie Flint's parents parted when he was young and he was brought up in a Salvation Army home. At an early age he was credited with the ability to 'see' the dead, but this served only to separate him from other children. When he left school he had a number of temporary jobs, including one as a gravedigger, before being drawn into a Spiritualist group where he developed his direct voice mediumship.

It took Flint seven years to develop this rare gift, sitting twice a week. At first he went into a deep trance and trumpets were used to amplify the voices of the spirits attempting to communicate with the living. As his powers

Leslie Flint (above) was a professional medium for 42 years, during which time his seances were closely scrutinised by scientists and psychical researchers, and the 'spirit voices' that were heard were recorded on tape. Many sitters testified that the voices were those of deceased persons, both famous and obscure, personally known to them. Rudolph Valentino (right, in *The sheik*), though a silent star in life, proved to be one of the most frequent communicators; Flint was, in turn, one of Valentino's most ardent fans

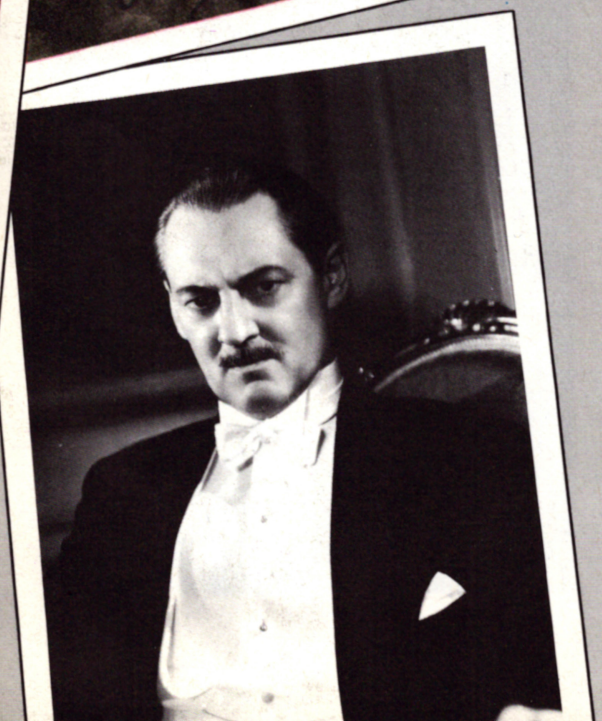
grew stronger, however, he was able to remain conscious during the seances and eventually to dispense with the trumpets. Sitters would assemble in the seance room, the lights would be put out and voices would address them from thin air. Flint occasionally joined in the conversation.

Rudolph Valentino came into Flint's world at an early stage. Another medium told him that a man with the initials R.V. 'wants to help you in a psychic way and work through you to help mankind'. The spirit then appeared to the medium dressed as an Arab. Valentino was the only person Flint could think of who fitted the bill – he had read a book about him as a teenager – but he could not understand why the great screen lover should want to help him.

Confirmation soon came from a totally unexpected source. A letter came to Flint from a German woman, saying that Valentino had communicated at a seance in Munich. He gave Flint's name and address and asked the medium to tell Flint that he was trying to make contact. Over a period the Munich seances produced items of information that corroborated statements made by Valentino to Flint through other mediums.

When Flint developed his direct voice mediumship, the film star was one of the first people to speak through him. Sometimes he spoke in his native Italian.

Valentino made a striking prediction. He said Flint would visit Hollywood, stay in Valentino's Beverly Hills home and hold seances in his bedroom. Unlikely as it seemed, it all came to pass. Some years later, while visiting Hollywood, Flint was invited to visit a psychical researcher. As soon as Flint was given the address he realised it was the former home of Valentino. And the room in which the seances were held was the star's former bedroom.



Some eminent visitors from the 'other side' who made guest appearances at Leslie Flint's seances: Amy Johnson (above right) reported that there were no aeroplanes in the afterlife for her to fly; George Bernard Shaw (above) continues to write, however. Leslie Howard (above left) and Lionel Barrymore (left) are two giants of the stage and screen who have allegedly spoken using Flint as a channel

Leslie Howard, Lionel Barrymore and Mrs Patrick Campbell are other actors who are said to have reappeared at Flint's seances. Rupert Brooke and George Bernard Shaw have returned to reveal that they are still writing. Amy Johnson said she was no longer flying: there are no aeroplanes in the spirit world. But they have pianos, and Frédéric Chopin is still playing and composing. Shakespeare continues to write plays 400 years after his works were first performed.

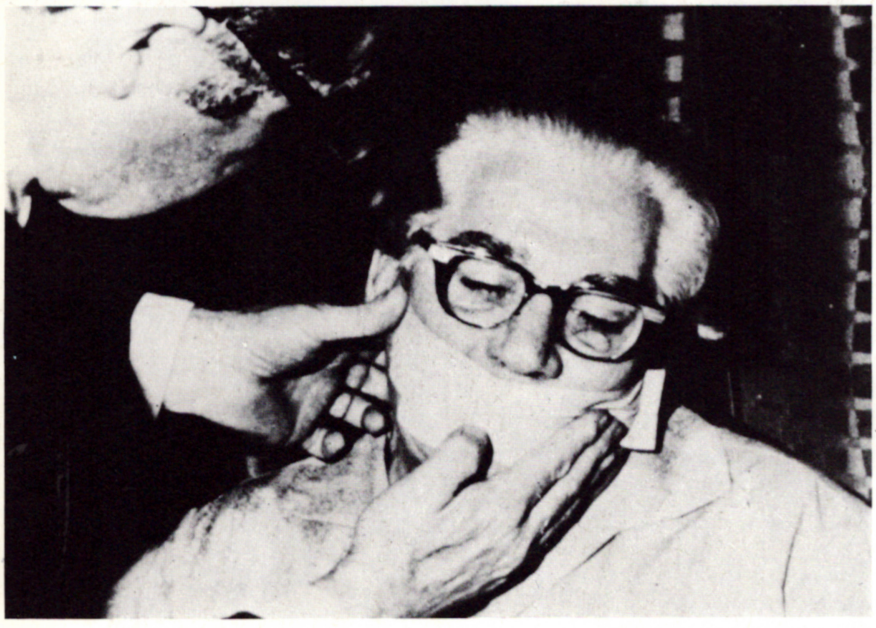
Mahatma Gandhi and Cosmo Gordon Lang, former Archbishop of Canterbury, have spoken at length on spiritual matters from their new vantage points in the next world. Marilyn Monroe has returned to say she did *not* commit suicide but died from an accidental overdose of drugs. Queen Victoria

sent messages to her last surviving daughter, Princess Louise, and King George V communicated to two members of his household.

How strong is the evidence that the voices are real and the communicators are who they say they are?

Flint has described himself as the 'most tested' medium in Britain and has apparently always been willing to take part in experiments. An early investigator of his direct voice mediumship was Dr Louis Young, who had exposed several doubtful mediums in the United States. He made Flint fill his mouth with coloured water before a seance started. The lights were put out. Spirits chattered away as usual. And at the end Flint returned the water from his mouth to a glass.

The Rev. Drayton Thomas, a member of the council of the Society for Psychical Research, conducted a more severe test in 1948. He placed a strip of sticking plaster across Flint's mouth and then covered it with a scarf. The medium's hands were tied to the arms of his chair and another cord ensured that he could not bend his head down, thus preventing him loosening the plaster with his hands.



Top: the Rev. C. Drayton Thomas, an SPR member, tested Flint in 1948. He was satisfied that during the test Flint remained bound and gagged, even though 'spirit voices' were heard clearly throughout

Leslie Flint's mouth was sealed with sticking plaster (above) in a test conducted by the *Sunday Express*. To prevent any tampering with the gag, his hands and his head were restrained (right). The investigators heard the voices, and also saw the 'ectoplasmic voice box', supposedly responsible for producing them, as it materialised in thin air, just a little way from the medium's head

Once again, spirit voices spoke with their usual clarity, often very loudly. This would have been impossible if Flint were faking them. But at the end of the seance the medium was found to be bound and gagged just as he was at the start, and the clergyman had considerable difficulty in removing the sticking plaster without causing pain.

In 1972 the *Sunday Express* science correspondent, Robert Chapman, assisted by Professor William R. Bennett, former head of the Department of Electrical Engineering at Columbia University, New York, and Nigel Buckmaster, an SPR member, devised an even more elaborate means of establishing the authenticity of the spirit voices. Flint was gagged and bound firmly to his chair. He was also fitted with a throat microphone, which would show whether he was producing the sounds by ventriloquism. Two television cameras were used, together with an infrared detector so that Flint could be observed in the dark.

Yet the voices spoke, and the investigators saw the ectoplasmic voice box, which is said to be used by spirit communicators, as it formed about 2 feet (60 centimetres) from the medium's head. 'There could be no question of these voices coming from some hidden tape recorder furtively switched on by Flint,' Chapman concluded, 'because there was question-and-answer dialogue with the "other side".'

Spirits on tape

Many of the celebrated spirit visitors were tape recorded by two researchers, George Woods and Betty Greene. They kept regular appointments with Flint for more than 15 years, during which they compiled a library of 500 tape recordings. Valentino appears on 60 of them.

The flavour of Flint's seances can be gained from this brief excerpt from a session held on 20 August 1962. A rich male voice began speaking, and Betty Greene gave him encouragement – which, however, was taken amiss by the communicator:

'Come along friend. You are doing very well.'

'Since I am doing precisely nothing at the moment, I can't see how you can consider I'm doing extremely well,' the voice replied, mockingly.

'We thought you were saying something and thought we hadn't heard you,' Betty Greene explained.

'I have never been known to say nothing.'

'Please, may we have your name?'

'If I couldn't say something of value,' the

Above left: George Woods and Betty Greene tape recorded Leslie Flint's seances over a period of 15 years, building a library of 'voices from the dead'

Left: 'Mickey', Leslie Flint's control or spirit 'master of ceremonies'. He was an Irish boy who had lived in Camden Town, north London, until he was killed by a lorry. This drawing was made by a 'psychic artist' at one of Flint's seances

voice continued, 'then I would rather say nothing.'

'Who is it speaking please?' Betty Greene persisted, but the voice chose to ignore the question in its next utterance.

'This is most extraordinary! Then again, being dead is an extraordinary business, especially when you are talking to people on Earth who are supposed to be alive and are very much dull and dim in consequence! What an extraordinary business this is!'

George Woods muttered 'yes' in agreement, and the visitor continued with a clue to his identity:

'There seems to have been a great deal of interest in my works, lately. . . .'

'Friend, may we have your name please?' Betty Greene asked again.

'My name got me into a great deal of trouble when I was on your side,' he responded and avoided the question for a while longer. Eventually, and grudgingly, he told the couple: 'Oh, you might as well know. My name is Wilde.'

'Oh,' said George Woods with evident delight, 'I've read your books.'

'How fortunate you are! I suppose I should be highly flattered. Not that I'm getting any royalties. No doubt you belong to a very good library.'

'Oscar Wilde' went on to talk about his new existence, which, he said, was not unlike his earthly life: 'I live a life of delicious sin, but only as the world sees sin. It is no longer sin here to be human and to be natural.'

Other voices that came through Flint could be judged by people who had had direct knowledge of the deceased person. Charles Loseby, QC, who had been a student under Lord Birkenhead, sometime Lord Chancellor, at Gray's Inn, testified that it was Lord Birkenhead's voice that Woods and Greene recorded at one of their seances. A retired physics teacher, J. Croft, who studied under the famous physicist and psychical researcher Sir Oliver Lodge, said that the voice on another tape recording

> had the qualities which we had associated with the voice of Sir Oliver Lodge. . . . There was a characteristic sibilance, an easy fluency of expression, and a choice of the apt word and phrase which we remembered were a feature of Sir Oliver Lodge's speech.

Mrs Alys F. Watson, god-daughter of Lilian Baylis who founded the Old Vic theatre in London, listened to another seance recording, after which she declared to George Woods: 'I shall be only too happy to confirm that it was Lilian Baylis's voice that I heard, which I am sure it was.'

Leslie Flint decided to retire in December 1976. The recordings made by Woods and Greene and by many other sitters provide a lasting reminder of his mediumship – and, doubtless, will continue to cause controversy for years to come. Despite many glowing tributes, sceptics have found it easy to pick holes in some of the seance conversations. The words and mannerisms of some famous speakers are not always what we would expect.

Flint himself, after all those years of listening to spirit voices in a darkened seance room, still finds some aspects of his own mediumship puzzling. He cannot explain, for example, why some voices spoke only in a whisper, whereas others spoke loudly.

One other aspect of his work, often overlooked in the articles about him, is worth recording. Very often sitters would sit and chat for an hour in his seance room and nothing would happen at all. Flint may have been one of the most gifted direct voice mediums of all time, but his powers could not be turned on at will.

Further reading

J. Arthur Findlay, *On the edge of the etheric*, Psychic Press 1931
Leslie Flint, *Voices in the dark*, Macmillan 1971
Neville Randall, *Life after death*, Corgi 1980

Despite many setbacks, medieval rulers continued their search for the legendary Christian king, Prester John; Henry the Navigator sent expeditions to find him – and Marco Polo claimed to have found him. But did Prester John exist?
PETER JAMES reports

The real Prester John?

MEDIEVAL EUROPEANS were entranced by the legends of the great king they knew as 'Prester John'. While Arthur, king of a bygone age, was still remembered in romances and ballads as the doyen of a utopian world of chivalry, grandeur and magic, Prester John was – literally – a living legend. Although the first reports of him had begun to circulate in the mid 12th century, intriguing rumours of Prester John's Christian kingdom in the remote East, a storehouse of fabled monsters and hidden wonders, continued to reach Europe until the early 16th century. But even if popular belief held that Prester John, like King Arthur or the Wandering Jew, was a special kind of earthly immortal, educated Europeans had long accepted that 'Prester John' could not be one man, but must be the title of a dynasty of kings. Word had it that Prester John had made many attempts to break through the Islamic barrier that separated the two Christian worlds of the West and the Far East. Letters proposing alliance, supposedly from Prester John, had been received by leaders of both groups. The kings of medieval Europe, fascinated by the marvellous tales of Prester John's kingdom, were eager to make contact with such a wealthy monarch.

Despite many disappointments, Europeans maintained their hope that Prester John could be found. Even the cruellest blunders of fate could not shake their conviction in his existence. In 1145 and 1221 news reached the West that the Turkish armies had been devastated by invaders from further east, and on both occasions it was widely beleived that Prester John, on his way to save Jerusalem from the Muslims, had been responsible. Although the Turkish defeat in Iraq in 1145 was one of the most severe military setbacks yet suffered by Islam, the assumption in Europe that the victor must have been a Christian was naïve wishful thinking. The invader was in fact the Buddhist chieftain Gur Khan, leading a mixed horde of Tartars and Chinese. Although this was never, apparently, discovered by medieval Europeans, the supposed arrival of 'Prester John' in 1221 was realised to be a bitter mistake soon enough. The 'Prester John' who arrived proved to be Genghis Khan, whose Mongol hordes ravaged an unsuspecting and unprepared Europe. Yet the medieval faith in Prester John tenaciously survived, and, when the Mongolian empire opened up Asia to European travellers, the quest for the elusive monarch was begun in earnest.

In the latter half of the 13th century papal emissaries, diplomats from the courts of Europe and adventurous traders took advantage of the *pax mongolica* to penetrate the interior of Asia, an area that had been barred to Europeans by the power of Islam for several centuries. They went mainly to find furs, spices and precious stones, to form alliances with the Mongol khans and to spread the 'true faith' of Roman Catholicism – but they also hoped to find Prester John. And the famous Venetian traveller Marco Polo, who first visited Peking in 1275, actually claimed to have located Prester John's kingdom.

According to Marco Polo, Prester John was once the Great Khan of the Mongols, and ruler of all Asia. The feared Genghis Khan had been a mere vassal of Prester John, or 'Wang Khan' as he was known in the East. The ambitious Genghis had murdered his overlord, but despite the success of Genghis Khan's dynasty, the heartland of Prester John's empire had survived as the kingdom of Tenduk, to the north of Mongolia. Polo tells us that Tenduk's ruler, King George, still bore the title of Prester John, and that 'he is both a Christian and a priest; the greater part of his inhabitants also being

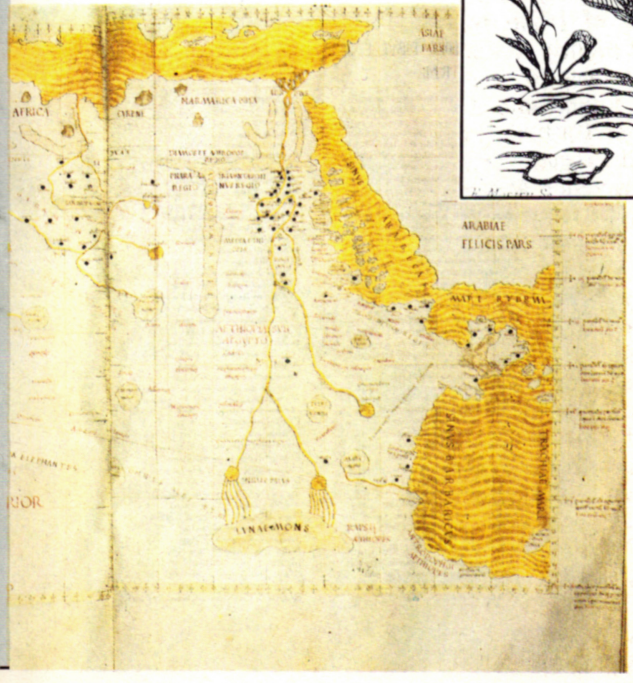
Marco Polo was undoubtedly the most famous explorer of the 13th century, setting out from his native Venice (above) to visit remote lands and strange peoples – including, he claimed, the kingdom of Prester John

Christian.' The claim put forward in *The travels of Marco Polo* carries great conviction, and the authority of Polo, a meticulous and scholarly observer who practically 'discovered' central and eastern Asia, should not be taken lightly – but had he really found the remnants of Prester John's fabled kingdom?

Modern historians feel that while George and Wang Khan were probably Christians, there is no good evidence to link the two rulers. Further, except for the dubious identification with Prester John, there is nothing to suggest that Wang Khan was once the dominant force in Asia, or that he ever tried to contact the Christian West. Other travellers to central Asia, following Marco Polo, found different Christian or semi-Christian kings whom they linked with the Prester John dynasty. The cases they made were just as convincing – or unconvincing – as the identification offered by Polo. As historian Sir Henry Yule remarked:

> When the Mongol conquests threw Asia open to the Frank [western European] travellers of the thirteenth century, their minds were full of Prester John; they sought in vain for an adequate representative, nor was it in the nature of things that they should not find some representative. In fact they found several.

Above right: an illustration from a 15th-century book of Marco Polo's adventures, showing papal letters being presented to the Great Khan of the Mongols. Polo claimed that Prester John had once held that title but had been murdered. However, George, ruler of the Mongolian empire of Tenduk, still held the title of 'Prester John' – meaning, allegedly, that he was a descendant of a dynasty of Christian priest-kings



The vast majority of medieval Europeans thought of Prester John as an immortal being, like the Wandering Jew (above), but scholars of the day rapidly came to the conclusion that Prester John was not one man but the name of a dynasty – but where was its kingdom? Some believed it to be in India, others in Ethiopia (left); although, to confuse the issue, the two place names were often used interchangeably

While it is easy to appreciate the excitement of the early Christians travelling through Asia at finding leaders of their own faith, the very multiplicity of Asian Prester John candidates suggests that there was nothing very special about any of them. The Mongol empire was extremely tolerant in religious matters and the various khans of Asia were constantly lobbied by intrepid Christian, Muslim, Hindu and Buddhist missionaries. The khans, understandably confused by the variety of religious convictions held by their subjects, became 'converted' to one belief or another, including Christianity, but with little lasting effect. There never was a priestly dynasty of Asian khans in the Prester John mould. Nor did any of the Christian khans of the day fit the priest-king's image.

Marco Polo, for all his brilliance, was certainly wrong when he tried to cast George, ruler of the small province of Tenduk, in the role of Prester John. A later traveller to this part of Asia, Friar Odoric, wrote in 1326 about the supposed Prester John with great disappointment: 'As regards him, not one hundredth part is true that is told of him.' The most damning testimony of all was that of the Christian Asians themselves. If there had been a stable kingdom large and wealthy enough to be associated with that of Prester John in Asia the Christians there would certainly have preserved its memory – but they had practically nothing to say about Prester John to the friars and traders who reached them during the 13th century. After Friar Odoric, the search for

Prester John in Asia was as good as finished.

At this stage it is remarkable that Europe did not abandon forever the hope of finding a 'real' Prester John. But, when Asia failed to provide an answer to the mystery, the search for the Prester's empire was focused on Africa. Although much closer to Europe than the Far East, and increasingly visited by Europeans, Africa still remained the 'Dark Continent'. The main obstacle to European travel there was the Mamluk empire of Egypt, the leading Islamic power and rival of Christian Europe in the later Middle Ages. The Mamluks maintained a tight grip on their north African possessions; Europeans attempting to go beyond Egypt into the interior were often dealt with harshly as spies.

Mission of the Navigator

Popular accounts and travellers' tales of the 14th century increasingly located Prester John's kingdom in Africa, in the region of Abyssinia (present-day Ethiopia). Was this a last feeble attempt by Europe to preserve its optimistic faith in Prester John, by moving him from the known into the unknown? If so, it was treated with surprising seriousness by some of the most educated figures of the later Middle Ages. In particular, the Portuguese king, Henry 'the Navigator' – almost a model of the enlightened Renaissance prince – seemed to have shaped his policy of African exploration largely around the conviction that Prester John could and would be found. Henry, responsible for opening up most of the west African coast to European shipping, was a man of immense vision and also of practical common sense. Historians see two main aims behind his ambition to circumnavigate Africa – greed for the fabulous wealth of the 'Indies' that could be reached only by a sea route; and the desire of forming an alliance with Prester John.

The idea that the shrewd Henry and his royal successors throughout the 15th and 16th centuries were motivated by a mere will-o'-the-wisp does not ring true. The evidence suggests that the Portuguese explorer kings were party to some far more concrete information about Prester John. In the late 15th century Portugal was engaged in a long conflict for control of north-west Africa, not only with the Islamic Moors but with Castilian Spain. Astute politicians, the Portuguese kings learned how to win the favour of the Pope – in those days the ultimate arbiter of disputes among Christian kingdoms. The Portuguese exploration of Africa was sanctioned and protected by the papacy and there can be little doubt that the Portuguese envoys to Rome would have wheedled out any information about Prester John available in the papal archives.

Above: the school of Henry the Navigator (1394–1460), the great Portuguese explorer-king, on the Algarve coast, Portugal. Henry's two burning desires were to find the fabled wealth of the Indies – and to find Prester John, for political and religious reasons. It seems highly unlikely that Henry – and his remarkably able successors – would have invested so much money in chasing a mere myth. Perhaps during their many dealings with the Pope they had access to concrete information about the real whereabouts of Prester John; certainly his alleged letters to Pope Alexander III seemed to come from Abyssinia (modern Ethiopia), which is exotic enough (top) to have earned its fabulous reputation. And significantly, the Portuguese kings sought control over north Africa

The Prester John stories had largely begun, in the 12th century, with an apparent exchange of letters between the legendary king and Pope Alexander III. Dubious copies of a lengthy epistle from Prester John to the Pope were published throughout Europe, but the amount of fantastic detail about mythological places and beasts (see page 2830) fails to inspire confidence in its authenticity. However, the Pope's reply in 1177 suggests that he had received a far more sober communication concerned with religious matters. The more famous epistles seem to have been embroidered versions of a genuine letter received from a remote Christian kingdom. Everything points towards Abyssinia as the source, and the Pope must have had an inkling of its real origin.

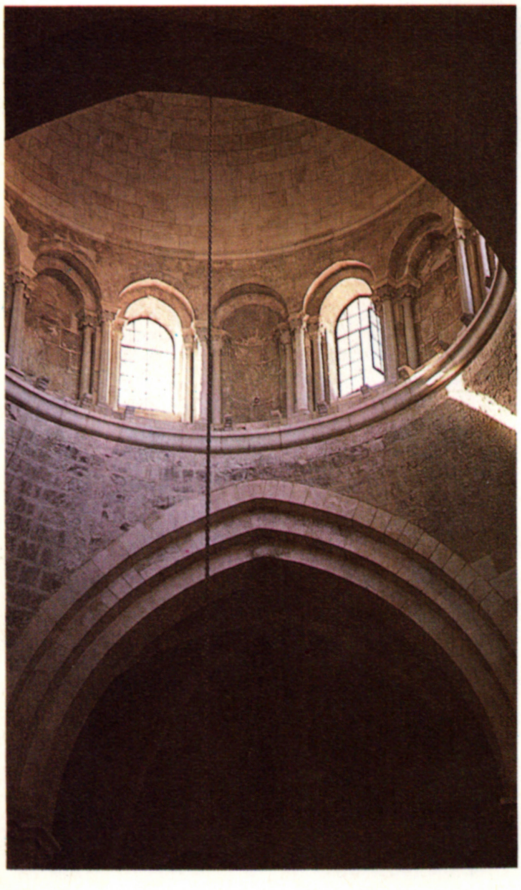
The remarkable Abyssinian Church, established shortly after the death of Christ, survived into the 1500s almost without contact with European Christianity. Somehow it thrived in its long isolation behind the Islamic barrier of Egypt. This was partly due to the awesome reputation of the grand monarchs of Abyssinia. According to Muslim tradition, there should be no *jihad* (holy war) against Abyssinia because when the prophet Mohammed had announced his mission to all the kings of the Earth, only the ruler of Abyssinia sent a polite reply.

The Abyssinian kings ruled over a sizeable chunk of eastern Africa so perhaps it was their reputation as powerful Christian monarchs that provided the basis for the Prester John stories. The letter of Pope Alexander III was almost certainly meant for the Abyssinian king. It refers to Prester John's desire to have an altar in the church of Jerusalem, and in the later Middle Ages Abyssinia is known to have possessed such a shrine in the church of the Holy Sepulchre. The recipient of the letter was addressed as 'king of India' – but this can readily be explained by the medieval confusion between the terms India and Ethiopia, which were sometimes used interchangeably. The Portuguese, with their extensive contacts both in Rome and northern Africa, seem simply to have put two and two together and discovered Prester John's true location.

In 1452 Abyssinian ambassadors were received in Lisbon, and in 1487 John II of Portugal sponsored two expeditions to reach 'Prester John'. Bernal Diaz was sent to find a sea route around Africa – an ambition not realised until Vasco de Gama's expedition 10 years later. But the intrepid diplomat Pedro de Covilham did reach the Ethiopian court, and the report of the Portuguese embassy in 1520 provides an exquisite account of the Abyssinian king and his customs. He was intensely religious, and subjected the Portuguese priests to repeated theological interrogations. His court was grand, if somewhat erratic in its style – it was an itinerant city that followed the king wherever the whim took him. The Abyssinian king had access to the vast mineral resources of Africa, and the further reaches of his kingdom were said to include the lands of the pygmies and Amazons. He was also thought to be the direct descendant of King Solomon, a claim upheld by the 20th-century emperor of Ethiopia, Haile Selassie. Here, at last, Europeans had found a monarch to match their idea of Prester John.

There can be little doubt that the Portuguese had found the right man, or dynasty, although – disappointingly – he did not meet the most fantastic requirements of the legends. The Abyssinian king was not the guardian of the Fountain of Perpetual Youth nor the Garden of Eden; and his kingdom, although immense and fairly rich by European standards and host to many strange beasts, was not quite the land littered with treasure or the zoo of centaurs, griffins and giants that medieval Europe had hoped for. All the same, the reputation of the Abyssinian king had played a crucial role in enticing the Portuguese to open up new routes to Africa. The medieval fascination with the 'unknown', and particularly the persistent belief in Prester John – which lasted for 400 years – helped to dispel ignorance about the true geography of Africa, Asia, and consequently the whole world.

Above: north Africa – the home of the 'Prester John' line of kings – seen from space. To medieval Europeans Abyssinia, ringed as it is by near-impenetrable mountains, was an unknown world – and an aptly mysterious home for the priest-king



Left: the church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, where Prester John was known to be eager to set up an altar. When the Abyssinian kings did so, this was taken by many to be final proof that 'Prester John' and the rich and pious Abyssinian dynasty were synonymous

The ghost with wet boots

The Admiral seemed a trifle absent-minded as he ordered his flagship to her doom. Was he also 'absent in spirit' – on a ghostly visit to his London home? MELVIN HARRIS studies the tales that surround a naval disaster

Left: Vice-Admiral Sir George Tryon, whose naval career was brought to an inglorious end when he ordered a disastrous manoeuvre. Was he the victim of an Arab curse?

Below: the *Camperdown* rams the *Victoria*, as depicted by a French magazine

Le Petit Journal
SUPPLÉMENT ILLUSTRÉ
Huit pages : CINQ centimes
TOUS LES JOURS Le Petit Journal 5 Centimes
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Numéro 137
SAMEDI 8 JUILLET 1893
Quatrième Année
LA CATASTROPHE DU « VICTORIA »
Mort de l'amiral Tryon et de 359 officiers et marins anglais

ON THE MORNING of 22 June 1893, HMS *Victoria* was the proud and formidable flagship of the British Mediterranean Fleet. By the afternoon, she lay on the sea bed, her hull torn open. Of her crew, 358 were dead – including the Vice-Admiral, Sir George Tryon.

The disaster was one of the most curious episodes in British naval history – for the *Victoria* was rammed by her sister ship HMS *Camperdown* and rammed as a direct result of orders given by Vice-Admiral Tryon himself!

When the fatal orders were given the fleet was in the eastern Mediterranean, steaming in two parallel columns – five ships in one, six in the other. The five were led by HMS *Camperdown*, commanded by Rear-Admiral Markham. The other column was headed by Vice-Admiral Tryon's *Victoria*. They were separated by a mere six cables – a trifle over 1200 yards (1100 metres). Yet they were ordered to turn *inwards* simultaneously and reverse direction before anchoring.

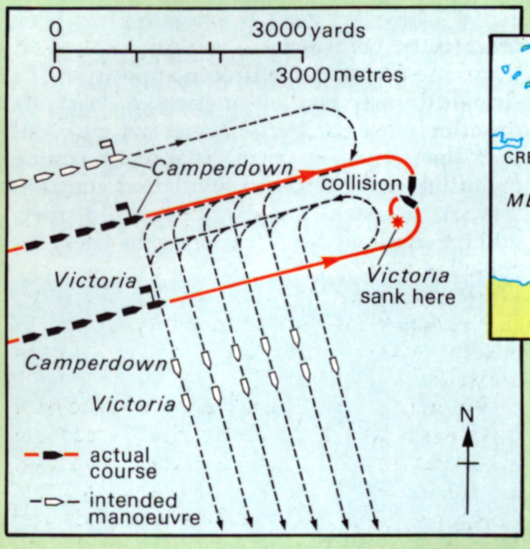
This order was monstrously inept, for the turning circles of the ironclads were huge – 800 yards (730 metres) easily. The warships would be set on a collision course. The danger was at once apparent to Admiral Markham, who queried the signalled orders – but they were repeated. After that, no one argued – indeed, few people ever dared argue with the arrogant Sir George. Instead, Markham acquiesced, blindly trusting that Tryon had some elaborate master plan in mind, and the *Camperdown* swung inwards.

'As if locked in a trance'

The *Victoria* began its turn at the same time, and the two giants steamed towards each other. They charged at each other as if they were foes bent on using the vicious steel rams on their bows. No one took evasive action: Admiral Markham was still confident that his chief would prove to be a tactical genius. Aboard the *Victoria* Captain Bourke was in a turmoil. He spoke to the Vice-Admiral and warned of the imminent danger. Yet Tryon remained dumb, almost as if he were locked in a trance, and the ship relentlessly followed its collision course. The Captain urgently asked for permission to go astern at full speed but Tryon remained silent, as if transfixed. The question was repeated again and again until, finally, the Admiral wearily answered: 'Yes'!

But by then it was far too late to save the

flagship. For even though the *Camperdown* had also reversed her screws, she did not have time to stop: still driving forward, she smashed into the *Victoria*'s bows with her ram. Behind that ram was the weight of the ship's 10,600 tonnes, against which the flagship's armour plate was pathetically weak protection. It was caved in and split open by sheer brute force – and the sea poured in.



The sinking of the *Victoria* took place off Tripoli in what is now Lebanon (below). Admiral Tryon intended that his two columns of ships should turn inwards and then form up in pairs (below left), but there was insufficient space for the manoeuvre

The end was horrific. The men in the engine room were trapped at their posts; many of the sailors who managed to struggle into the sea were chopped to pieces by the furiously revolving propellers. As for Sir George, he made no attempt to save himself.

With Admiral Tryon's death all chance of knowing what he had really had in mind vanished. There are some, though, who claim that he was supernaturally doomed: that his mind was unhinged by the remorseless working out of a curse. The latest among the 'curse' advocates is Mr Richard Winer, well known for his books on the Bermuda Triangle (see page 1261).

Winer, in *From the Devil's Triangle to the Devil's Jaw*, takes 10 pages to tell the story. He spices it with the claim that this curse began to unfold on the shores of the Mediterranean. According to Winer, hundreds of Syrian Arabs had waited and watched for the British fleet to be hit by this curse.

To add strength to his fantastic view, he relates the amazing tale of Sir George Tryon's 'last London appearance'. This took place at a late morning tea party organised by Lady Tryon at her home in Belgravia.

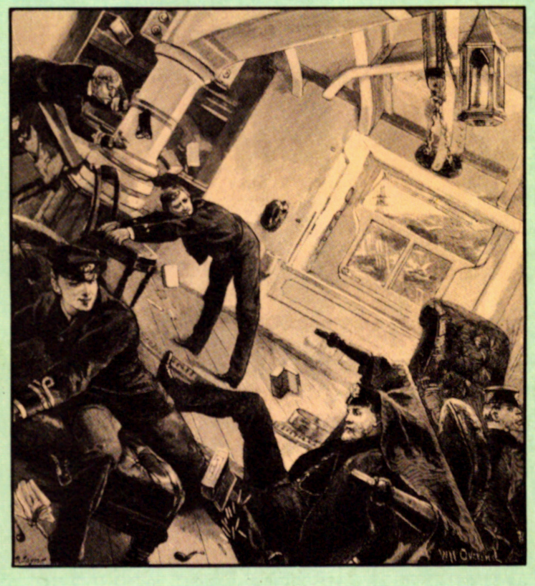
> The majority of the guests were wives of the Royal Navy's leading commanders. About noon, Admiral Tryon was seen walking down the stairs and across the drawing room. The Admiral was attired in his full-dress uniform but appeared to be oblivious to the guests in his home.

We then learn that this party was held on that sorrowful 22 June – so that solid-looking Admiral was nothing but a spectre, for at the time Sir George himself was some thousands of miles away on the doomed *Victoria*.

No doubt the author imagines that he is on safe ground in recounting this story, for in various forms it has been cited by many other authors. Indeed the late James Wentworth Day, a writer on the supernatural, even described it as 'one of the best-authenticated ghost stories in living London history'.

But for all that, Richard Winer's confidence is misplaced. A careful comparison of the different versions shows that the story has the same mythical quality as the Lord Dufferin tale (see page 1130).

For a start, there is conflict over even the most basic claims. One account has it that Tryon walked through the reception room of his home and then disappeared. Another states that he walked through the crowded ballroom and was seen by some 300 guests. Another claims that he appeared at a party in the drawing room at the time of his death – that is, at about 3.40 p.m. But the most detailed account of all gives the time of his appearance as 11.30 p.m. – that is, some eight hours *after* his death. And according to this last account Sir George walked across the ballroom floor and was recognised by some 50 or so guests.

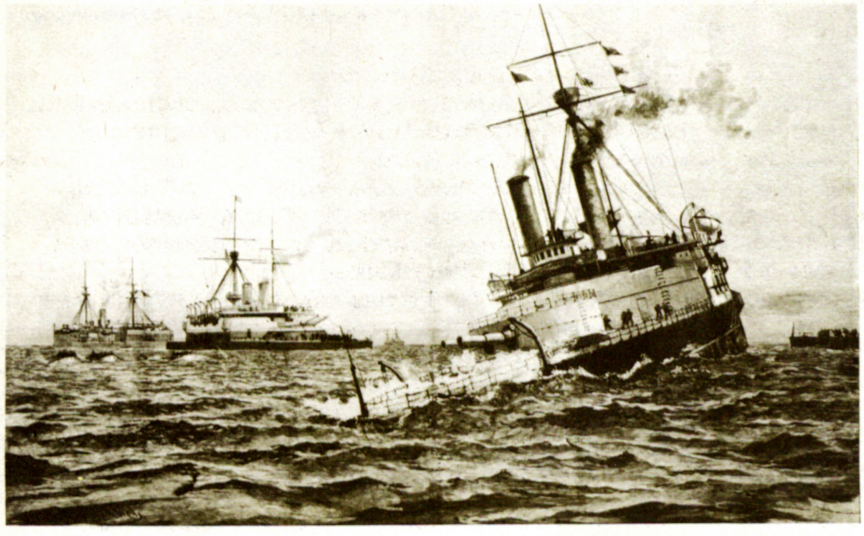


Above: Sir George Tryon was involved in some mishaps of varying degrees of seriousness in the years before his death. Here he shows a notable lack of sea legs as his ship is caught by a squall during naval manoeuvres off Plymouth in 1890. During these exercises he distinguished himself by ordering the same manoeuvre that was to prove so disastrous three years later. In 1890, however, he had the good fortune to be disobeyed

So here we have complete discord over the time, the exact place and the number of witnesses. There is one point of close accord, though, for they all agree that Lady Tryon saw nothing of the apparition. Richard Winer claims that she did see it, and thus adds his own special variation.

Now these disagreements are significant enough; but even more significant is the complete absence of contemporary references by witnesses. For a short while during this author's search for such references, however, two leads looked promising.

The first was found in an account by Ian Fellowes-Gordon, in which he quotes from an alleged eyewitness. He introduces the quotation by saying: 'Months later Sir Jasper



Hoad was to explain what had happened. And his account, verified by every other guest present in the ballroom at 11.25 that evening, would go down in history.' There follows a reconstructed version of a conversation between Sir Jasper and Lady Tryon.

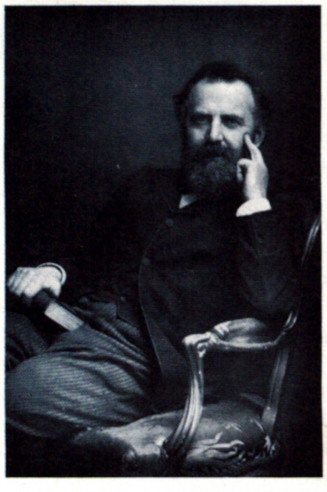
Unfortunately, though, Ian Fellowes-Gordon is no longer able to remember where the information in the conversation came from. In the event this proved unimportant. For the peerage lists for 1893 and later years show that *there never was* a Sir Jasper Hoad. The 'testimony' of a man who never existed counts as nothing.

The second lead was found in the most bizarre account of the Tryon case in print. It is included in Will Eisner's *Spirit casebook of true haunted houses and ghosts*. And this time Sir George is said to have appeared in the library of his London house in 'Bristol Square', where guests found him standing behind his desk. His eyes were riveted on his globe, 'his finger pointing to Tripoli . . . on the Mediterranean [in what was then Syria]. They greeted him. He nodded absently . . . trance-like in his movements.' They told the glad news of Sir George's presence to Lady Tryon but when she reached the library it was empty. But on the globe was a still-moist fingerprint, and the clock had stopped at 3.44 – the time of his death. And the 'most startling of all: a damp footprint – the Admiral's size – on the floor.'

Bizarre as it is, this version does at least give a source: the August 1893 issue of *The Review of Reviews*. This reference, however, turns out to be bogus. The account in that issue of *The Review of Reviews* is nothing but a straightforward report of the collision at sea with no mention of the ghostly portent in London. What is more, there is no mention of the apparition in *any* issue of the *Review* from 1893 to 1895 – and that in itself is most revealing. For the magazine's editor was W.T. Stead, an ardent Spiritualist who went out of his way to collect and print any good story that had a supernatural slant. In fact his Christmas 1892 issues were crammed full of 'true ghost stories'. And oddly enough, among them is one that turns out to be the genesis of the Tryon legend!

It is entitled 'A ghost in a ballroom'. It tells how a Mr W. walked through a ballroom without speaking to any of the people present, including the lady he was due to partner. On the following day, the witnesses learned that Mr W. had been found drowned. Remarkably, 'his watch had stopped at 10.15', the exact time at which he had been seen in the ballroom.

So the tale of the ballroom apparition of a drowned man was circulating at least six months *before* the *Victoria* met her end. But that disaster was so spectacular and puzzling that it invited rumour, speculation and fantasy. A new slant was given to an old story, and the shadowy Mr W. became the beefy Sir George – complete with wet boots.



Top: the *Victoria* settles in the water and begins to heel over to the starboard side. Hundreds of sailors drowned when she sank: one was Admiral Tryon, who did not attempt to save himself

Above: W.T. Stead, editor of *The Review of Reviews*. The Christmas before the sinking of the *Victoria* he had published a report of a man who, at the very moment he was drowning, was 'seen' attending a ball. Did this tale attach itself to the tragedy of Admiral Tryon?

Right: the Tryons' Belgravia home, where the Admiral's apparition was allegedly seen. It ignored the guests and left wet footprints on the carpet – strange behaviour for a well-bred man, but fitting for the ghost of someone who had drowned in the eastern Mediterranean that same day

But how about that curse? Does *that* stand up to scrutiny? Not for one moment. As Admiral Colomb subsequently testified, Sir George acted 'with a strong and frequently expressed impatience of all mathematical calculations and mechanical certainties'. He also had a mathematical blind spot. For he occasionally confused the radius of a ship's turning circle with its diameter. This confusion had almost led to a disaster some three years earlier. He then had signalled precisely the same fatal manoeuvre during the 1890 naval exercises off Plymouth. But Rear-Admiral Tracey had refused to comply.

As for Tryon's 'trance state', it must be remembered that at the time he was plagued by a painful ulcer on the leg, which refused to heal. The medication and pain killers he was using were more than probably laced with laudanum and other opium derivatives, like so many medical remedies in those days. These were enough to slow anyone's reflexes and bring a glazed, vacant look to the eyes!

Post script

Your letters to THE UNEXPLAINED

Dear Sir,
I should like to tell of an experience I had some years ago. My husband and I had just moved into our first house – a pre-war house. I was alone, standing at the kitchen sink, one afternoon about tea-time, when something made me turn round – and there in the doorway was a little boy, about five years old, dressed in an old-fashioned sailor suit. I was so surprised that I just stared – and within what seemed like seconds the little boy was gone.

I thought no more about it until, about a month later, my husband and I decided to remove an old fireplace in the kitchen. Behind it were some old photographs – and in one of them, in what was evidently a family group, was the little boy, dressed exactly as I had seen him. We tried to trace the history of the house to find out who he might have been, but had no luck. I never saw him again.
Yours faithfully,
Jennifer M. Lagoe Great Barr, Birmingham

Dear Sir,
I am writing to tell you of a very puzzling experience. I have to admit that I am still as nonplussed by it today as I was when it happened, back in 1949.

I am German by birth, and after the Second World War I married a British soldier. In January 1948 we came to England. My knowledge of the English language was then virtually non-existent. I learned by listening, and when the weird event happened I could still barely speak English.

My husband had asked me to make him a steak-and-kidney pudding. I had not the faintest idea what a steak-and-kidney pudding was – nor how to make such a thing. Near tears I decided, come what may, that my husband could not eat the ingredients raw, and placed the meat and kidneys in a saucepan, added water, salt and pepper and put it on the stove to boil. I went to the sink to rinse my hands – and, while I stood there, I heard a woman's voice:

'You call yourself a cook? You've put too much salt into the meat.'

I was astonished – I should mention that we lived in a maisonette with only one door to the street, and that was locked at the time. Who could the woman be? I turned round, and there on the chair furthest away from me sat a lady. She was about 5 foot 2 inches [1.57 metres] tall, middle-aged, wearing a high-necked, mutton-sleeved dress. For decoration, she had a cameo brooch on a velvet band around her throat. Even the high neck of the dress could not conceal the fact that she had a goitre.

And – sheer bliss – I found I could understand every word she was saying. (I still don't know, to this day, whether she was speaking English or German.) I told her that I was expected to make a steak-and-kidney pudding, and didn't know how.

She laughed.

'That's no problem,' she said. 'I know how and I shall show you.'

And she did. She did not touch anything, but told me exactly what to do. I did as I was told, put the pudding in a basin, covered it with paper and a towel – then, when it was all in a large saucepan ready for steaming, I asked her if she would like a cup of tea. She said she would love one.

I turned to the sink, filled the kettle with water, put it on to boil, turned back to ask the woman something – only to find she had gone.

Only then did I begin to wonder, as I still do, who was she? How did she get in? I had heard neither her coming nor her going. And when I checked the front door, it was still firmly locked.

The pudding, by the way, my husband voted the best he had ever eaten. But I am still wondering who was the lady who took pity on me and my ignorance? To whom do I owe my thanks?
Yours faithfully,
Lilo Brent (Mrs) Southwick, Sussex

Dear Sir,
What I am about to tell you is the absolute truth. It happened 18 years ago in a village called Susworth, near Scunthorpe in Lincolnshire. It was a summer evening, between six and half past, and I was on my way to the village shop. What made me look up I don't know – perhaps I was alerted by the unnatural stillness; there was no sound from birds or insects. At any rate, what I saw in front of me, about half a mile [800 metres] away, was a big black object, something like the spinning tops we used to play with when we were children. There was no sound coming from it, no lights of any kind, and I couldn't tell whether or not it was spinning. It seemed just to stay still, there in the sky, until after a few minutes I heard the sound of jet engines over to my right. When I looked, two jets were approaching. They passed right in front of me, then turned towards the object – but in the space of just a few seconds it had shrunk into nothing. By the time the jets had circled back, it was nowhere to be seen. I've never been able to forget it.
Yours faithfully,
(*Name and address supplied*)

Dear Sir,
According to *The Unexplained* (issue 132), many psychical researchers would not approve of my attitude that '*all* psychics are frauds.' If this were indeed my attitude, I would strongly disapprove of it myself. For the record: I do *not* take it for granted that all individuals claiming paranormal abilities are cheats. I think it likely that many are the victims of an honest error in attributing normal occurrences to paranormal causes. Furthermore, I do not wish to be dogmatic about ESP. I completely disagree with those of my fellow 'debunkers' who find the notion of 'psi' inherently ridiculous.

However, for methodological reasons I would think it unwise to allow a naïve faith in the integrity of human beings to overrule the scepticism called for by the extraordinary nature of some claims.
Yours faithfully,
Piet Hein Hoebens Amsterdam, Netherlands

Erratum: in the photograph of Colin Brookes-Smith and Kenneth Batcheldor on page 2478 of the Unexplained *(issue 124), Colin Brookes-Smith is on the right, Kenneth Batcheldor on the left, not vice versa as stated in the caption.*

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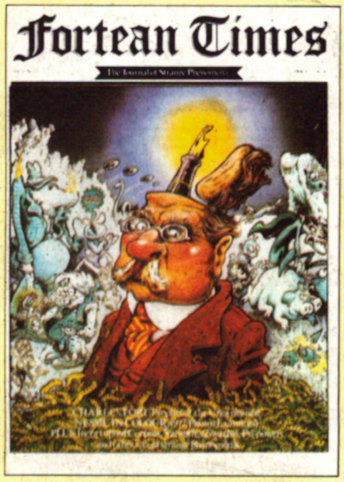

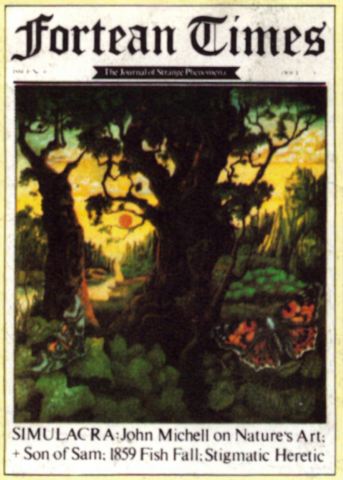

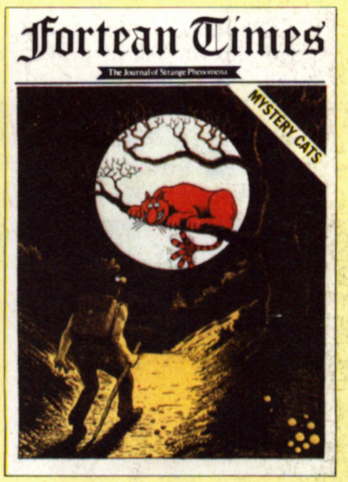

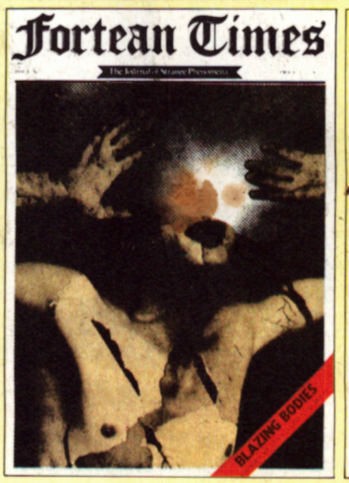

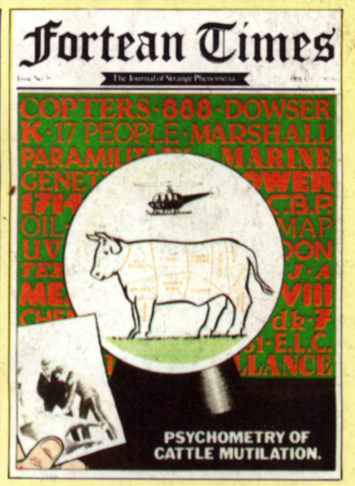

WOLF CHILDREN & WILD MEN ☐ POLTERGEIST PHENOMENA ☐ THE 'SURREY PUMA' & OTHER ALIEN ANIMALS ☐ COLOURED SNOWS & RAINS ☐ SPONTANEOUS COMBUSTION OF HUMANS ☐ STIGMATA & LEVITATION ☐ DISCOVERIES OF AMERICA BEFORE COLUMBUS ☐ FALLS OF FISH, BLOOD & ICE FROM THE SKY ☐ MYSTERIOUS AERIAL SOUNDS ☐ IMPOSSIBLE OBJECTS IN ANCIENT STRATA ☐ OCCULT CRIMES ☐ ELECTROMAGNETIC ENIGMAS ☐ UFOS & RELATED PHENOMENA ☐ TELEPORTATIONS OF PEOPLE & THINGS ☐ EVIDENCE OF 'LITTLE PEOPLE' & GIANTS ☐ BALL LIGHTNING & ODD LIGHTS ☐ GHOSTS & APPARITIONS ☐ BIGFOOT & UNIDENTIFIED ANIMALS ☐ STRANGE DEATHS, MURDERS & ACCIDENTS ☐ PHANTOM SMELLS & 'MASS HYSTERIA' ☐ HOAXES & CONTROVERSIES IN SCIENCE ☐ PSI POWERS ☐ SWARMS & MIGRATIONS ☐ CURIOSITIES OF BEHAVIOUR & PSYCHOLOGY ☐ LAKE & SEA MONSTERS ☐ PARANORMAL EXPERIENCES ☐ 'HOLLOW EARTH' & OTHER COSMOLOGIES ☐ SIGHTINGS OF PREHISTORIC CREATURES ☐ MYSTERIOUS IMAGES & PHOTOS ☐ CHALLENGES TO DARWINISM ☐ TOADS IN STONES ☐ ANTIQUARIAN EVIDENCE OF 'SPACEMEN' ☐ THOUGHT FORMS & PSYCHOTRONICS ☐ VAMPIRES & WEREWOLVES ☐ RELIGIOUS & OTHER VISIONS ☐ LOST CONTINENTS & FABLED LANDS ☐ BAD LUCK, CURSES & JINXES ☐ SHAMANISM & ECSTASY ☐ IDIOT SAVANTS, GENIUSES & ECCENTRICS ☐ NATURAL & UNNATURAL CATASTROPHES ☐ THE EVIDENCE FOR MIRACLES ☐ ENCOUNTERS WITH ANGELS, FAIRIES & ALIENS ☐ VAST & INSIDIOUS CONSPIRACIES ☐ SPONTANEOUS IMAGES IN NATURE ☐ FOLKLORE & MYTH ☐

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